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Baldrige Looked to New Frontiers

The violent death of Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige has cheated America of a leader who had a vision of the future. In his quiet corner of Washington, he sought to open up the space frontier to entrepreneurs as well as explorers.

As he saw the future, it would belong to the nation that conquered space. For the technology of tomorrow, he believed, will be developed on the space frontier.

Baldrige watched in dismay as the Soviet Union, like the tortoise, pulled relentlessly ahead in the space race. Rabbit-like, America would leap ahead briefly, then sit back on its haunches while the plodding Soviets moved steadily upward.

The Soviets launched their rockets in all kinds of weather, undeterred by accidents or failures. A few cosmonauts died, some on the launch pad, others in orbit. The Soviet Union paused a moment to mourn and deliver medals to the survivors, then immediately resumed the space flights.

All told, the Soviets have sent up 40 times more space launches than we have. Of 103 rockets that roared into orbit last year, 91 came out of the Soviet Union, their lowest number in six years.

Soviet cosmonauts have had far more experience in space than American astronauts. The cosmonauts have performed unmatched feats in space. They have trained aboard space stations that the United States won't be able to duplicate until the mid-1990s.

"Jane's Space Flight Directory," the most eminent authority on space, calls the Soviet lead in space "frightening." According to Jane's, the Soviet

Union is now 10 years ahead of the United States in space development.

Yet Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has assigned still higher priority to the Soviet space program. Intelligence reports explain that he believes space exploration will boost Soviet technology and give the Soviet Union an edge in the high-tech age.

All these facts troubled Malcolm Baldrige. He believed that progress in space was too important to be left to the scientists and specialists alone. "Space is no longer the exclusive domain of science," he contended. He wanted to turn the free-enterprise system loose on this new frontier.

"Cutting-edge technology has always been one of America's competitive advantages," he wrote shortly before he died. "It is important to our security and prosperity that we maintain leadership in this field." We will fall behind in technology, he warned, unless we "maintain our space leadership into the 21st century and beyond."

Baldrige contended that "government should devote itself to research and leave the commercial development and application of new technologies to the private sector." He looked upon space as a "national laboratory" where the government should conduct research. But as fast as businesses could adopt the new technologies and operate in space, he wanted to declare the orbit path around the earth a "commercial zone" open to entrepreneurs.

It was his vision that space explorers and entrepreneurs, working together, would develop technologies that would improve everyday life, thus ensuring that America's best years lie ahead.